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E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/31/2028
TAGS: [PREL](#) [PARM](#) [PGOV](#) [EG](#)
SUBJECT: SUEZ INCIDENT: PM NAZIF ON POTUS CALL,
INVESTIGATION, CULPABILITY AND COMPENSATION

REF: A. CAIRO 609 B. CAIRO 602 C. CAIRO 581

Classified By: Ambassador Francis Ricciardone for reasons 1.4 (b)
and (d).

¶1. (S) Summary: On March 27 Prime Minister Ahmed Nazif told us that President Bush's condolence phone call to President Mubarak had helped calm a "fiery" cabinet meeting. He said that the GOE's investigation into the Suez incident is aimed at preventing the possibility of a recurrence. PM Nazif said that President Mubarak personally made the decision to facilitate the "Global Patriot's" exit from the Suez to avoid escalation of the incident. The PM agreed to ask investigators to examine the deceased's political background. PM Nazif recommended that the U.S. not rush into compensating the deceased's family, and said that offering any amount of money now would inflame the situation. On March 30, the Suez Governor responded to the Ambassador's ref A letter by urging the U.S. to avoid paying compensation before the completion of investigations. The President's March 27 call to President Mubarak changed the tone of subsequent press reporting, with pro-Government media highlighting the call, and even the independent and opposition media moderating their coverage of the entire Suez incident. End summary.

Impact of POTUS Call; GOE Investigation

¶2. (SBU) The Ambassador reached Prime Minister Ahmed Nazif by phone late on March 27, following a "fiery" emergency cabinet meeting which Nazif had convened to address the Suez incident. PM Nazif told the Ambassador that media bulletins reporting President Bush's phone call to Mubarak arrived at the cabinet meeting "just in time to calm things down a bit." He said, "Thank God for that phone call. No one wants this to get out of hand, but there are important legal and sovereignty issues at stake." He said that the cabinet was studying the legal questions regarding the U.S. crew's firing of weapons in the location where the incident occurred, in a staging area just south of the entry to the canal.

¶3. (SBU) PM Nazif told the Ambassador, "We appreciate your cooperation, and President Bush's expressions of sympathy and especially, his pledge of a full investigation. This is urgent and essential. We accept that this was an accident, but obviously something went wrong somewhere. We expect the investigation will identify the errors, and provide some kind of admission of error. We need a full report." The Ambassador told PM Nazif that the U.S. hopes for continued full bilateral cooperation in this sensitive case. As an example, the Ambassador thanked him for GOE's immediate

authorization for an embassy NCIS officer to view the remains of the deceased March 25. The Ambassador said that such transparency had been essential to the U.S. understanding that indeed the man was apparently an accidental victim of fire from the "Global Patriot." PM Nazif reciprocated the Ambassador's pledge of full cooperation in conducting the investigation.

Culpability

14. (C) The Ambassador noted to Nazif that the Egyptian media had highlighted the appearance of a U.S. reluctance to "apologize." The Ambassador said that the U.S. is deeply sorry for the loss of this young Egyptian husband and father, but until an investigation is complete, the U.S. would not make statements that might appear to accept culpability. In particular, the U.S. would continue to reserve the right to protect its ships.

15. (C) PM Nazif acknowledged the U.S. position, and said, "There may have been problems on both sides. Those 'bonbotiya' (small local boatmen purveying wares to large international ships in transit) are illegal, but they are everywhere and the authorities generally ignore them. They are simple people making a living outside the formal economy, and they ignore the rules. But these are our waters. There is no good excuse for Americans to shoot here. These issues are extremely sensitive now."

Mubarak Decision to Release the "Global Patriot"

16. (S) The Ambassador informed Nazif that the "Global Patriot" had waited at the mooring area at Suez until the Suez Canal Authorities permitted it to proceed to enter the canal. Had the GOE wished to detain the ship at that point or during transit of the canal, the "Global Patriot" would have stayed. PM Nazif said he was aware of this, and reported that President Mubarak personally had made the decision to release the "Global Patriot," recognizing the likely political repercussions of detaining the ship.

Security Investigation of the Deceased

17. (S) The Ambassador asked PM Nazif's assistance in arranging a GOE investigation of the religious and political background of the deceased and his boat's crew, as a likely means of ruling out any terrorist intent. The Ambassador noted that the boat had continued its course apparently aimed directly at the "Global Patriot's" stern. He also mentioned media reports that the victim's family and friends at one point were ululating, apparently in public celebration of a "martyr's" death. PM Nazif admitted that the GOE so far had not learned why the boat in question continued to approach the "Global Patriot" despite its warnings. He said he had not seen media reports of the bereaved family's ululations. PM Nazif pointed out that Egyptian media use the word "martyr" even to refer to victims of catastrophes and major traffic accidents. Nonetheless, PM Nazif agreed to ask GOE investigators to look into the background of the boatmen.

Compensation

18. (S) The Ambassador told PM Nazif that as a matter of compassion for the bereaved family, we were prepared immediately to offer a modest "solatia" or apology payment, with the possibility of further compensation to be offered thereafter. The Ambassador said that the U.S. recognized the sensitivity of the matter and would therefore be guided by Egyptian advice. PM Nazif said that offering any amount of

money now would inflame the situation, as the oppositionists would charge that the Americans were trying to buy their way out of culpability, and that the USG, with GOE acceptance, was evaluating Egyptian lives cheaply. At this time, the PM said, the amount of compensation was not the issue, but our willingness to provide compensation in accordance with local tradition was the important point. Nazif commended VADM Cosgriff's public statement confirming our willingness to assist the bereaved family and to lighten its burden, leaving details to be discussed privately. He pledged GOE cooperation in managing U.S. dealings with the family regarding compensation, and urged us not to rush the process.

¶9. (U) On March 30, the Governor of Suez responded to the Ambassador's ref A letter asking for advice regarding U.S. provision of compensation and condolences, cautioning against compensation before the conclusion of investigations.

Begin letter text (informal embassy translation):

H.E Ambassador Francis Ricciardone
Embassy of the United States of America

I received your kind note which referred to President Bush's call with President Mubarak in which he paid condolences for the death of Mr. Mohammed Afifi in the American ship incident in Suez. I also received your expression of remorse and that of the United States of America for this sad incident, which we hope not to be repeated in the future. I would like to thank you for your note and your kind condolences to me and to the people of Suez. We are still waiting for the conclusion of the military prosecution investigations and its results, after which, we then welcome your assistance in alleviating the sorrow of the family of the deceased.

Please accept my regards.

Mohammed Seif Al-din Galal
Governor of Suez

Media Reaction

¶10. (U) News reports of President Bush's March 27 phone call to President Mubarak significantly changed the tone of press reports on this incident. Prior to the call, independent and opposition press ran the story as the lead on their front pages, accusing the U.S. of arrogance, and television talk shows demanded apologies. After the President's call, the dynamic shifted, with the state-owned news agency instant messaging news of the call within 30 minutes of its completion. Pro-government papers ran coverage of the call on their front pages March 28, and independent and opposition papers ran their coverage of the story on the inside pages. Likewise, television talk show commentary on the story dropped off immediately after the President's call. Over the March 28-29 weekend, coverage shifted to the GOE's decision reportedly to install surveillance cameras in the Suez Canal.

¶11. (U) Additionally, independent and opposition media reported over the March 28-29 weekend and on March 30 on their inside pages that over 100 opposition MPs requested an explanation of why the GOE allowed the "Global Patriot" to exit the Suez Canal, and demanded that the shooters be tried in Egypt. Opposition papers also reported that some opposition MPs demanded the GOE's resignation over the incident. One opposition paper reported March 29 that the socialist Tagammu party accused the GOE of "negligence" in the killing of an Egyptian citizen.

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